The Role of Reflective Functioning in Understanding Parents’ Emotion Socialization

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INTRO

• Caregivers who experienced adverse events in childhood, particularly in interactions with their own parent, tend to struggle with parenting when they become a caregiver.

• Emotion socialization is the process of teaching children to understand and regulate their emotions, and has implications for their social development.

• To help children understand their emotions, caregivers must be able to see the child as motivated by intentional mental states, which is referred to as reflective functioning (RF).

• This study tested the hypothesis that caregivers who experienced invalidation or abuse in childhood would have poorer reflective functioning, which in turn would predict less responsive caregiving. Specifically, parents with poor RF would report less constructive emotion socialization strategies.

METHODS

1. 64 caregivers and their 3-5 year old children were recruited from Head Start preschools

2. Caregivers’ childhood abuse (MOPS; Parker et al., 1997) and invalidation (ICES; Mountford et al., 2004), emotion socialization (ERPS; Paterson et al., 2012) and Reflective Functioning (PRFQ; Luyten et al., 2017) were assessed with self-report questionnaires

RESULTS

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations among caregiver experiences and parenting styles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion Related Parenting Style</th>
<th>Emotion Related Parenting Style: Emotion Coaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caregiver</td>
<td>When my child is sad, we sit down and talk over the sadness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invalidation</td>
<td>It’s important to help the child find out what caused the child’s anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse</td>
<td>When my child is sad, I try to help the child explore what is making him or her sad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Reflective Functioning</td>
<td>When my child is sad, I try to help him or her figure out why the feeling is there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of Uncertainty or Ineffectiveness</td>
<td>When my child is angry, it’s time to solve a problem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reverse Scored**

DISCUSSION

• No demographic characteristics were significantly associated with the variables

• Caregivers’ childhood invalidation and abuse did not predict parental reflective functioning or parental responsiveness

• Parental reflective functioning was significantly related to feelings of uncertainty or ineffectiveness in emotion socialization. As parental reflective functioning increased, so did caregivers reported certainty and effectiveness in emotion socialization

• However, the mediational model proposed was not supported.

• It has been suggested that a wider array of childhood experiences predict how emotions will be utilized.

• Future studies must identify mechanisms related to RF and emotion socialization, as well as build caregiver’s ability to develop and explore their children’s emotional disclosures.